

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Gorbachev in Lilliput

Mikhail Gorbachev's three-day effort to stall Lithuania's independence movement has failed. The personal politicking that works in the West got jeers in Vilnius.

Mr. Gorbachev faces entire populations steeped in bitterness after 50 years of chafing under Moscow rule. The way the Baltic peoples see it, leaving a "union" they were forced to join by military might is not "secession." That's a key point in the political crisis building up in the Soviet Union. It has never really been a "union," but rather an empire run by Russians.

Mr. Gorbachev has been trying, with words and promises, to unify an empire that in the past was held together by force. If he applies force now, or is made to do so by hard-line colleagues, he risks losing the good will he has built up in his courtship of the West. His sick economy desperately needs that good will, but that doesn't mean he won't act.

The Soviet leader seems besieged with civil unrest on all sides. Yesterday the Soviets declared a state of emergency in the growing Azerbaijani-Armenian war. Georgians were demonstrating in Moscow, protesting harsh methods used against them. In East Berlin yesterday, tens of thousands of Germans stormed the secret-police headquarters and ransacked it, shouting to their protesting Communist premier, Hans Modrow, "We are the people!" But it is in the Baltic States where the contradictions inherent in the entity known as the Soviet Union crash head-on.

No conceivable rationale exists for evading Baltic demands for independence. The Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow already has in effect torn up the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop protocols that annexed Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to Stalin's giant slave camp.

Moscow's main argument for keeping the Baltics captive is easy to discern. If the three of them go, what would prevent Moldavians (captured in the same coup as the Balts), Armenians

and Ukrainians from doing the same? As events throughout Eastern Europe are demonstrating, the prisoners are storming the walls of their once-invincible prisons. The wardens are fighting a holding action but not a very successful one, as Romania's provisional government demonstrated over the weekend by temporarily banning the Communist Party. The Communists cannot stop, it seems, what has gone so far so fast.

A hopeful view might argue that Mr. Gorbachev does have long-range strategic vision. Perhaps he is prepared to dismantle the empire in favor of a Russian state that would more nearly resemble 19th-century

The Soviet Republics



Russia. It would still be a nuclear superpower, the largest country on the Continent, and free at last of the ethnically and economically debilitating baggage that the Russians have blamed for their troubles, however inaccurately.

Without its Comecon economic alliance, it might find greater freedom to emulate the drive already under way in other Comecon nations toward private property and market economics, but at a slower pace more acceptable to its still powerful party and pervasive state bureaucracies.

But back to earth. It is more likely that Mr. Gorbachev will try to hold the Soviet empire together as long as he is able, employing his powers of persuasion as a first resort. He seems unlikely to give away anything of consequence, which means that some parts of the empire, and the Baltic States in particular, will keep on trying to take back the independence that is rightfully theirs.